

October 2021

International Assistance for All in Syria: Using Trusted Syrian Intermediaries

RECOMMENDATIONS ON AID DELIVERY IN SYRIA

Introduction

Concerned by the vast manipulation, politicisation and diversion of international aid during the decade-long conflict in Syria, and the risk this poses for future recovery and reconstruction, the Syria Resource Group proposed that international donor interventions should be guided by a human rights-based conditionality rather than one tied to the political transition.¹ The Group's discussion paper, *International Assistance for All in Syria* (2020), suggests that the international community tailor aid to Syria's multi-faceted reality, avoid using compromised channels of assistance delivery, work on a small and local level, use trusted Syrian intermediaries, monitor thoroughly and reactivate the role of the private sector.

Several of these recommendations have been elaborated on by the SRG in short individual policy papers such as this one.² The purpose of this particular paper is to highlight *the value of trusted Syrian intermediaries* in the just and uncompromised provision of international aid. It is based on the SRG's experiences with international interventions over the past 10 years, as well as consultations with experts, local community leaders and activists engaged in humanitarian and recovery activities in Syria. The paper suggests that a shift away from traditional models of delivering humanitarian, recovery and development aid in Syria would contribute to more sustainable peacebuilding.

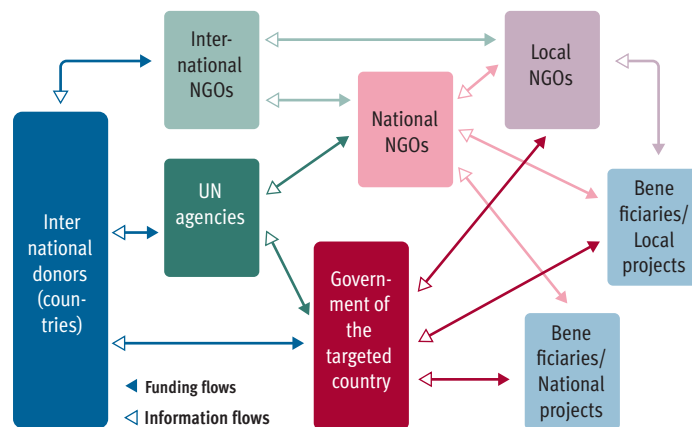
1. The Group uses the term "human rights-based conditionality" to refer to a proposed requirement that international aid in Syria promote and protect human rights and foster conditions for sustainable peace.

2. Other policy papers include *International Assistance for All in Syria: Going Local, Small and Incremental* and *International Assistance for All in Syria: Choosing the Right Channels*.

Why Syrian intermediaries?

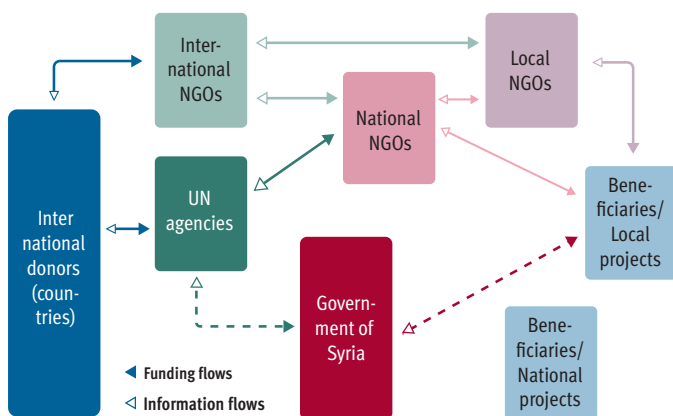
Two of the most important pillars of the policy framework proposed by the SRG – going local, small and incremental and avoiding compromised channels – require that the international community rethinks its funding structures when delivering aid. The traditional model of distributing non-humanitarian assistance can be described as a constant flow of financial resources and information between donors, government, United Nations agencies, international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs), national and local organisations, and beneficiaries. The figure below illustrates the most relevant exchanges of funding and information (needs assessments, monitoring, reporting) between key actors. It is a simplified image; additional minor flows, such as development grants to national NGOs, are omitted.

TRADITIONAL MODEL OF AID DELIVERY

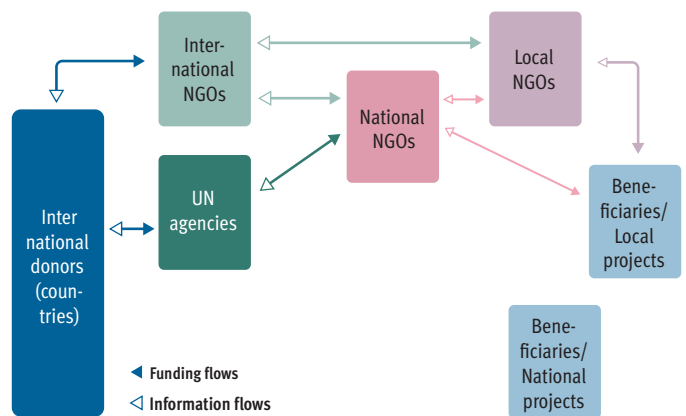


In Syria, two key factors have affected the model’s implementation on the ground: 1) the country is divided, with areas beyond the central government’s control; and 2) the Syrian government has been isolated internationally, which has restricted its access to international aid.

SYRIA: GOVERNMENT-HELD AREAS

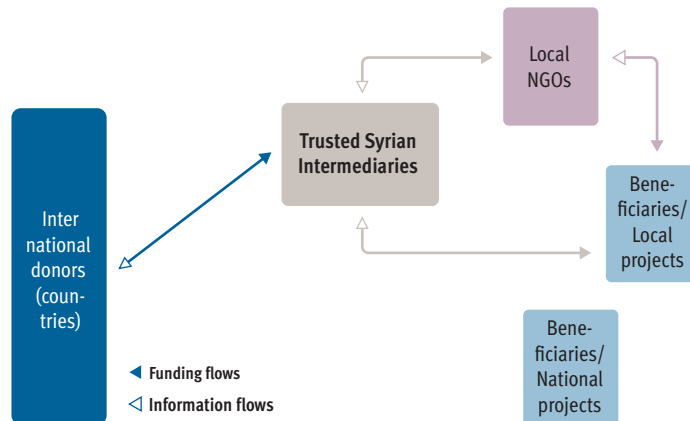


SYRIA: NON-GOVERNMENT-HELD AREAS



The SRG policy framework puts emphasis on working locally, on a small scale and incrementally through aid delivery channels that are not compromised. This approach requires effectively managing a large number of small stakeholders, which can be challenging when donors are removed from local actors and realities. Furthermore, potential obstacles are exacerbated in conflict environments, where international aid risks unintentionally contributing to large-scale corruption, empowering war criminals, contributing to the war economy, entrenching divisions or undermining peace, as has occurred in the past. **Local intermediaries provide an important solution to these problems of aid diversion.**

PROPOSED ALTERNATIVE MODEL FOR (NON-HUMANITARIAN) ASSISTANCE



In particular, local intermediaries have the ability to bridge the divide between donors and local communities. In the current context, **they must be 1) Syrian**, with the high level of connections and knowledge required to effectively navigate the complex local environment; **and 2) trusted by both Syrian communities and donors** with regards to their commitment to human rights, sustainable peace and not compromising Syrian national interests.

Finding the right local intermediaries

It is important to identify the local intermediaries' roles as a prior step to identifying the right actors. In the localised approach proposed by the SRG, the intermediaries' roles include:

- Gathering trusted information and verifying sources (including needs and stakeholder assessments and impartial data collection).
- Vetting channels (people, organisations, companies) or determining the necessary conditions to engage with compromised channels.
- Actively participating in programme and project design.
- Channelling funds towards local partners where direct funding is not possible.
- Managing programmes and projects and monitoring their implementation, including respect of the human rights-based conditionality across programme cycles (from inception to design, monitoring, and evaluation).

Clear selection criteria should be used to identify existing structures or to help create new ones if required. Syrian intermediaries should collectively:

- Adhere to the human rights-based conditionality and have mechanisms that guarantee ongoing compliance.
- Have knowledge of and access to people and information from several areas in Syria, and thus be familiar with the multiple realities within Syria.
- Be trusted by local communities, including for their respect for the principles of human rights, transparency and fairness.
- Be trusted by donors, including having or developing the capacity to comply with their rules of transparency, accountability and programme management.

Some models of such intermediaries exist but they either tend to operate only at a small scale, or need structural adjustments (eg, the Syria Recovery Trust Fund and the Assistance Coordination Unit). New models could be created based on the existing examples, like the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs clusters, exclusively constituted by trusted Syrian organisations or companies organised on a regional and/or sectoral basis.

Other models would need to be created through innovative solutions, such as an online pool of Syrians who vet intermediaries; online groups of trusted regional/local representatives capable of validating possible ‘deals’ with compromised local actors; groups of trusted experts that confirm projects’ conformity with current and future regional/national interests; certification of trusted organisations; and an online network of trusted and secure ‘anonymous’ monitors. Another possible innovation is the creation of a dedicated, trusted and well-monitored payment mechanism as a safe channel for all official financial assistance, which would allow the private sector, the Syrian diaspora and trusted Syrian NGOs – actors currently excluded from aid provision due to restrictive measures – to realise financial aid transfers to Syria.

Experiences from other post-conflict settings demonstrate the value of using local intermediaries where intercommunal peace is at stake or where central institutions are not adequate partners in delivering results (eg, [Lebanon’s Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework](#)).

Local intermediaries in Northern Ireland: a comparative model?

After the commencement of the peace process in 1995, the European Union Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation entrusted the management of a large funding programme to a range of civil society-led Intermediary Funding Bodies (IFBs), which operated on the basis of agreed peacebuilding and reconstruction measures. The IFB committees were composed of representatives from local communities, worked with clear criteria and used a built-in transparency process. In parallel, Northern Ireland has also benefited from a multi-donor independent trust fund (International Fund for Ireland) committed to local-level peacebuilding, which has operated since 1986.

Final reflections

Identifying the required number of competent, trusted Syrian intermediaries will take time and effort. A **structured and coordinated international assistance effort should begin with empowering or creating local structures that may become the backbone of recovery in Syria** – a recovery that is just and accessible to all, not only to one side of the conflict. Before any programming of non-humanitarian assistance starts, identifying, creating and building the capacity of these intermediaries should be the first step. A pilot programme could be developed, with one or more trusted Syrian intermediaries monitoring the conformity of current aid with the human rights-based conditionality. It is time to acknowledge that conventional solutions have been proven to be inadequate.

The **Syria Resource Group** (SRG) is an independent, multidisciplinary and non-affiliated platform of leading Syrian experts based in the country, closely connected to it, or actively involved from abroad in creative, realistic and principled solutions to Syria's future reconstruction and the international financing of it. The SRG promotes a deliberately Syrian-led approach by providing local-level assessment, generating locally conceived proposals and solutions, and helping shape – rather than merely react to – international aid offerings. The group aims to promote inclusive assistance for the Syrian population, taking into account the diverse demographic, political, economic and security realities of the country. The Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) backs the SRG with operational support and international expertise, helping ensure that the SRG's ideas and vision are effectively promoted and channelled.

Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.